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vrije Universiteit *amsterdam*

Where did anthropology go? Or: The need for "Human Nature"*.

I was recently asked the question: "Where did anthropology go?" by a psycholinguist from a famous American university. She was commenting on the fact that she had tried to establish contact with the anthropology department of her institution, hoping that she would find somebody who would contribute to a discussion of her main research interest: the relation of words to concepts. She had assumed that the socio-cultural anthropologists would have general theories or, at least, ask general questions, about the way children's upbringing in different cultures and environments would constrain, or not constrain, how children represented the material and the social world. She was hoping for information about exotic societies and about those groups, which she had already learned, should not be called primitive, but that is what she meant. She was hoping that her enquiry about a topic that is inevitable in any discussion about culture would be equally central to the three disciplines of psychology, linguistics and anthropology, and would therefore be an ideal ground for constructive co-operation, that is, one where the different parties could articulate and challenge the theories on which their different disciplines are built.

In fact she found that nobody was interested in working with her, but what surprised her most was the hostility she perceived, caused, not only by the suggestion that cultural social anthropologists were interested in simple exotic societies, but even more by the idea that they might be interested in formulating and answering general questions about the nature of the human species or that their work could be compatible with disciplines such as hers.

The lack of any generalising theoretical framework within which her research interest might find a place is not surprising when we look at what kind of thing is done in many university departments under the label social or cultural anthropology. Take for example the interests listed on the web site of the anthropology department of the University of California at Berkeley (which incidentally is not where our psycholinguist came from). Here are some: *Genomics and the anthropology of modernity, Science and reason, The anthropologies of education, law, tourism, Food and energy, space and the body, Post-soviet political discourse, Violence, trauma and their political and subjective consequences, Social and cultural history, (Post) colonialism, Social mediation of mind.*

I do not intend here to criticise the value of the studies, which lie behind these titles. In fact, I know that many are excellent and interesting, but one need not be surprised that our psycholinguist got so little response to her request for a coherent body of theories from anthropologists. What possible core of shared questions and interest could departments of this sort have to which her interest might then be related? Furthermore, when occasionally a proposal of more general import is made in contemporary anthropology, as for example Nancy Scheper-Hughes' hypothesis, based on an example from Brazil, that grinding poverty leads to parents' indifference towards the death of their children, the matter is criticised anecdotally with ethnographic counter examples, but the general hypothesis is not scrutinised at the theoretical level and systematically tested, but is simply left to float in never never land (1992). This incoherent

* I would like to thank R. Astuti, E. Keller and C. Stafford for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

fragmentation, in any and every direction, so long as the topics will find favour with funding bodies and seems relevant to the concerns of the moment, makes the existence of anthropology departments as working units difficult to justify intellectually. Indeed, this is what Eric Wolf already complained about shortly before his death, and led to the near destruction of anthropology at Stanford University.

But are we dealing simply with a problem internal to the ways in which universities function, simply an accidental result of the way the discipline has evolved in the academy, yet another illustration of the inevitable arbitrariness and shift of boundaries within science? The frustrated hope on the part of our psycholinguist that she could obtain guidance to her questions from professional anthropologists might indeed seem a rather limited problem of communication within modern universities, where, after all, it is common for people from one discipline to misunderstand the nature of another.

I shall argue today that, in fact, there is much more at stake, because the negative response to our psycholinguist's request for a discipline, such as what anthropology might reasonably be expected to be, is far from an arcane missed appointment, internal to the cloistered world of academia.

Let us consider a very different situation.

One evening, about six months ago, I was doing fieldwork in the little village of Ranomena. This is a place deep in the Malagasy forest, cut off from all modern means of communication and only reachable on foot. I was sitting in near total darkness in the tiny house of the family who have been my hosts, on and off, during several periods of field study, scattered over almost thirty years. The evening meal had been eaten and consequently the fire had burned down. This was, as is usual at this time, a rare moment of relaxation and reflection, in which I joined freely. The conversation soon turned, as it often did, to questions of a philosophical nature, though it had begun in a less general way. People had been imitating, remembering and making fun of the accents and the vocabularies of other ethnic groups in the huge and culturally very varied island of Madagascar. The people of the village, the men at least, are experts in linguistic and cultural diversity since, when they are young and vigorous, they go as wage labourers to many different parts of the country, where they work for several months at a time as woodcutters or carpenters, and where, furthermore, they are often employed by merchants originating from different parts of the Indian subcontinent. After many anecdotes about the linguistic variations they had encountered on their travels, the conversation rapidly took on a more theoretical turn. If people used different words, did they understand the phenomena they designated so differently in the same way? If we are all related, how had this variation come about? Were the speakers of unrelated languages fundamentally different types of moral beings? And, if they were, as some maintained, was this due to the language they had learnt, or was the language the manifestation of a deeper cause? In order to grapple with this problem the discussants proposed a thought experiment. What about the children of those Malagasy who had emigrated to France and who only spoke French? Were they in any sense really Malagasy in their social morality, in their ways of thinking and working and in their emotions? Would their skin be whiter than that of their parents? And, if not, as everybody seemed finally to agree, if they came back to live in Madagascar, would their dark skin mean that they would learn Malagasy more easily than, for example, I had, or the children of Europeans? Thus the question of what is learnt and what is innate was formulated and reformulated in many, often, completely abstract forms.

The seminar continued.

If there was so much variation and mutability, could one say that all humans were one species or several? Were there discontinuities in racial and cultural variation or was there only a continuum? If we were all one family and, at bottom, all thought alike, how could it be that the histories of different groups of mankind had been so dissimilar and had given rise to such differences in technological knowledge and wealth? Why were the people from overseas, which the people of Ranomena tend to consider all much of a muchness, continually fighting, when they, by contrast, were all so peaceful? And, given that there is only one God (it is a Catholic village), how could it be that in the world there are people like the Hindus who do such completely exotic, unthinkable things, as burning their dead?

These were the questions I recorded in just one evening, but they and other related ones are a familiar feature of intellectual life in Ranomena. People argue among themselves over these matters, whether I am there or not. However, because I was there, and because by now, after much explaining, the villagers of Ranomena have some idea of the kind of subject I teach, they turned to me for advice and expertise. After all, as they often tell me, I had seen and read about many more different people in the world than they had, I had studied long and hard and had gathered in myself the wisdom of many other knowledgeable people who had been my teachers. So, what could I say about these crucial questions? Well, I answered as best I could. But, what strikes me most clearly, as I reflect on such pleasant and interesting evenings, is that my co-villagers, in spite of their lack of formal education, were coming to the subject of anthropology with much the same questions as we might expect from anybody who turns to our discipline in a country such as the Netherlands, whether as students, as readers of learned publications, or as practitioners of other disciplines in the academy. Indeed, as you may have noted, the very same question was being asked by the psycholinguist of people who call themselve anthropologists as did some of the Malagasy villagers.

The point I want to stress through these anecdotes is that there is a widespread, perhaps universal, demand for a subject such as anthropology and that this demand exists irrespective of culture, degree of education and intellectual tradition. People ask these questions of anthropologists because anthropology would seem to be the kind of discipline which might provide answers. One can assume that it is to get answers to questions such as those that preoccupied the villagers of Ranomena, that people in the Netherlands, or indeed anywhere, choose to study anthropology.

But, had the villagers of Ranomena actually penetrated the portals of the academy, would they, then, have to face the same disappointment as our psycholinguist? The answer is probably yes. And, in order to understand how and why this state of affairs has come about I attempt here an extremely brief overview of the academic history of the discipline. One, which will inevitably involve gross oversimplification and will ignore many counter currents and eddies.

The late nineteenth century was a time when a number of highly influential anthropological books were published. These purported no less than to give a general account of the history of humanity in terms of general evolutionary laws. Thus, general characteristics of human beings were seen to be the cause of human history, which, therefore, had a necessary and unilineal character. These types of books were not new, but what was new was the fact that these general accounts were to be supported by a scientific research enterprise, the aim of which was to collect empirical evidence in support of the different theories. This

became the justification for setting up university chairs and ultimately whole departments of anthropology in many European and American countries.

The discipline was to operate a bridge between the history of life, up to the emergence of *Homo sapiens*, the subject matter of zoology, and the history of mankind, up to the invention of writing, by which point historians could take over. Evidence to account for what had happened during this gap was to come from the four fields approach, still evident in many contemporary anthropology departments in the United States. The four fields were archaeology, biological anthropology, linguistics and what became social and cultural anthropology.

The role of social or cultural anthropology in this schema was to provide evidence for the reconstruction of the history of mankind through the study of primitive people. The study of these people was relevant because of a familiar, but fundamental, assumption. The different groups of mankind advanced along a single necessary line of progress, from one stage to another. Technological or intellectual advances were the driving force for forward movement but this was along a road, which was traced by the internal potential of a shared human nature. The itinerary regarding politics, kinship, religion, morals and anything else, was thus universal and what varied was how far different groups had got pushed along. This being so, it followed that, if one found a living contemporary group of people using a certain type of primitive technology, for example hunting and gathering, a study of their political organisation, their kinship system, their religion, and so on, would yield information about the politics, kinship, religion and morals of our distant ancestors at the time when they had reached the same point along that single road. By this mean, anthropology could discover the immaterial aspects of the life of those forebears whose material prehistory was being only gradually revealed by archaeology.

This general method was shared by most anthropological accounts of the time, although, of course, the evidence produced in this way was far from clear and, therefore a number of competing accounts of the early history of mankind were produced. All these, however, shared an amazing confidence in the ability of the subject and its methods to fulfil the vast program, which it had outlined for itself. These theories are usually described as evolutionist or more precisely as unilineal evolutionist theories and they all rest on a largely unexamined and simple notion of human nature.

The period about which I have been talking may be referred to as that of the founders of anthropology. It produced an ordered image of the history of mankind and of cultural and social variation. It is probably because of this that, in many ways, it was the heyday of anthropology's popular success. Consequently we may consider what happened next as its twilight. In fact, there is not one but there are two accounts to be told about this subsequent history of the dimming of the evolutionists' light. The first concerns the reputation among anthropologists of this moment of confidence in their subject and the other its reputation in the wider world beyond. It is the interaction between the two that interests me.

Very shortly after its establishment, evolutionist anthropology was destroyed by an obvious but fundamental criticism, which took very different forms, but is always ultimately based on the same objection. This is usually called the theory of diffusionism. I shall use the term here much more widely than is usually done to stress the fact that, in spite of superficial differences, we are always dealing with the same point. Thus I include under the term "diffusionism", such trends as Geertzian culturalism and "postmodernism" which all rest on the same foundation. The basic point of diffusionism- the basic objection to evolutionist anthropology- is that human culture does not proceed along a predetermined

line, following a limited number of ordered stages. This is because human beings have the ability to learn from each other and can then pass on acquired traits through communication. This enables them to further build, transform, modify and combine what others have learnt and passed on to them. It is thus possible to argue, perfectly validly, if somewhat simply, that it is human contacts and thus, ultimately history, which, in great part, makes people what they are, rather than their "nature". For the diffusionists it is not fundamental essential characteristics of human beings that explain history but the accidents of whom we are with and have been with. Unlike animals to whom evolutionary laws apply and who are, in the long term, determined by their biological inheritance, humans, for their part, are determined by other individuals, in other words, they are determined by culture.

The implications of focusing on the ability of humans to borrow information and then to pass it on to another by non genetic means is genuinely far reaching. It is what makes culture possible. Since people borrow cultural traits one from another, they can individually combine bits and pieces from different individuals. It follows that there are no naturally distinct social or cultural groups, tribes, peoples, etc. And since these combinations arise from anywhere, anybody and in any order, there are no general predictable laws of history. Because, unlike other animals, humans can transmit acquired characteristics across and within generations, the history of culture becomes an entangled, disordered, infinitely complex mess, quite unlike the ordered procession envisaged by the evolutionists. And since the past was this tangled directionless web, so will be the future; therefore it cannot be predicted. Most fundamental of all is the fact that diffusionist theory removes internal human nature as the determinant source of what happens in history and replaces it by factors which are external. It is as though the ability of humans to communicate and to pass on what they have learnt to others made all innate natural capacities irrelevant to the study of human history. A point of view exemplified in Geertz's uncharacteristically bad tempered and sarcastic lecture "Anti Anti Relativism" (Geertz 1984).

Diffusionism was, therefore, a knock out blow against the original ambition of a science that was going to explain what had happened in human history in terms of a necessary evolutionary sequence. No subsequent theoretical criticism has ever had a similar impact. Indeed, the point is so fundamental that it has simply been repeated ever since in many different forms. The emphasis on the "construction" of human beings by culture, in various postmodern guises, is one of these, as is the consequent revulsion against so called "grand theory".

Anthropology began by assuming that human history could be written as the natural history of human beings, as though we were an ordinary kind of animal whose behaviour was governed by the same kind of natural laws as that of other forms of life. This tenet was then apparently totally negated by the emphasis on culture, the product of constitutive communication, the producer of unpredictable historical particularities. Thus, unilineal evolutionary theory of human history was thrown out for a good reason and a totally opposite view was proposed: one in which people are represented as infinitely variable creatures, constructed entirely by the whims of innumerable accidents of communication. Animals were constructed by nature, humans by their freed minds. This being so, anthropology could not anymore have human nature as its subject because there was no such thing. Like history, social and cultural anthropology could then only be an assemblage of anecdotes about this and that. And this is what it has become and what has produced the heterogeneous list of interests of the Berkeley Anthropology department. To use the title of an older history of the subject, in a somewhat different way than it was meant, anthropology moved from the study of "ape to angels" (Hays 1958).

The contemporary situation seems therefore to be one where evolutionism has been dismissed and diffusionism has won, thereby leaving anthropology without the only centre it could have: the study of human beings.

This is well illustrated by the form of most contemporary anthropology teaching. At the risk of caricature, anthropology courses, whether introductory or more specialised, have in common the following general structure. They begin with a historical section, where the general theories of early anthropologists are explained. These may be from long ago, such as those of Boas, Durkheim, Westermark or Morgan, or, more likely, from the middle distance, Mauss, Radcliffe Brown, Malinowski, Van Wouden, or Lévi-Strauss. Then, what is wrong with these theories is demonstrated, usually by means of ethnographic examples, and there the matter rests. Students are, therefore, left with a feeling of having little to say about the subject in general. They have lost a few misleading illusions in the process, which is all to the good; but, also, more insidiously, they have learnt that the very attempt to generalise about human beings -as the historical figures did- was, in and of itself, wrong. To be a good anthropologist thus seems to require to have learnt not to ask the questions which the Ranomena villagers, or our psycholinguist, ask.

This largely negative stance is not simply due to the way anthropology has developed within the academy. It is also due to the non-academic reputation of early evolutionary theories.

Ideas and publications proposing a unilineal evolution of human societies, going through a fixed number of stages, greatly antedates the academic anthropological evolutionists. But, probably, in part because these were so much in accord with their time, the works of the founders had an extraordinary contemporary influence, though often, somewhat indirectly, through such writers as Freud, Marx and several influential literary figures. The late nineteenth century and early twentieth was thus the period when anthropology, as an academic subject, although a very young academic subject, had an enormous impact on intellectual life. Since then, however, save for a few moments that, for a short time, seem to buckle the trend, the general influence of contemporary anthropology has declined. The work of more recent anthropologists, especially those whose work has come out since the 1950's, with the possible exception of that of Margaret Mead on sex and Lévi-Strauss on structuralism, has had little influence on the main intellectual currents of the time.

On the other hand, outside anthropology departments, the influence of the founders of the discipline has continued unabated, distilled in various forms in the general culture in which we bathe. The idea of an evolutionary sequence of societies, customs, laws, religions, morals, extremely similar to that set out by the evolutionist anthropologists, is still with us, even though sometimes a little disguised for the sake of political correctness. Thus, few people flinch at the implications of remarks such as "It is particularly shocking to witness such brutality in the twentieth century and in an advanced country". Even more surprising is the fact that books such as those of Tylor, Morgan or Frazer, which in their times sold far far more than any contemporary anthropology works, are still in print and still much read today. The reason for the continuing influence of these writers and the relative lack of influence of their successors is not difficult to find. It is simply that these early authors gave fundamental answers, however unacceptable, to the questions asked by the Malagasy villagers and by our colleagues in other disciplines, while more recent anthropologists do not.

The fact that professional anthropologists live in a world where theories they consider obsolete still dominate, while their own voices are little heard, has a reinforcing effect on the negative theoretical character of teaching. Every year university anthropologists are faced with new generations of students who have, or are imagined to have, consciously or unconsciously, absorbed anthropological evolutionist theories. Thus the teaching of anthropology is often envisaged by the professionals as an endless fight against erroneous doctrines held by the neophytes and which, ironically, were largely encouraged, if not created, by their discipline's forebears.

But there is yet a further element in the educational scene which influences anthropology and pushes it still further in this same direction.

Apart from the general impression that attempting to formulate general theories is a bad and obsolete habit, another message comes through, loud and clear, in the teaching of anthropology. One of the very bad things which the early anthropologists did, was to have placed their own values above those of other cultures, thereby seeing the process of evolution as necessarily progressing towards peoples such as themselves and towards types of societies such as their own. It followed that those most unlike themselves were rude primitives of the very lowest order. To do this sort of thing is called ethnocentrism and is very wicked. Such a message is easily and well received by the kind of students who are likely to choose anthropology and who come from a world where the evils of racism and intolerance have been all too clear.

However, this rejection is far from unproblematic. When we look more closely, we find all kinds of elements treacherously merged with this notion of ethnocentrism. The charge that the evolutionist anthropologists were somehow revelling in the inferiority of those they chose to call primitives and that this legitimated violence against them is anachronistic and grossly unfair and, ironically, ethnocentric, since it ignores the context and language of their time. For example, Tylor, the founder of British anthropology, was very active in the anti-slavery movement and Morgan, the founder of American anthropology, was much involved in supporting Indian rights. Indeed, the real political involvement of the founders of anthropology contrasts with its absence on the part of many contemporary anthropologists who willingly loudly denounce evolutionism as part of their general campaign for political correctness.

Also involved in the notion of ethnocentrism is the warning against seeing people of other cultures through the lens of our own values. In fact, two elements should be distinguished here. The first is a methodological point. It is an injunction to anthropologists that the task of interpretation requires as much as possible an effort of imagination. We must try to see others as though from their point of view in order to understand them. Few would quarrel with the benefits of such a stance. But, closely intertwined with this, is the idea that the avoidance of ethnocentrism is not just a matter of a temporary suspension of disbelief, but an absolute injunction, i.e., that we should never judge or evaluate others by the categories or standards of our culture. This proposal leads inevitably to moral and cognitive relativism.

The ethical problems of moral relativism are fundamental and have often been discussed, notably by de Martino (1977). Here, however, I want to concentrate on the theoretical, or perhaps the rhetorical, problems involved in cognitive relativism.

Cognitive relativism is often adopted without much theoretical scrutiny since it is based on a gut reaction to any attempt at generalisation. Generalisations are felt

to be nothing but mere products of the particular cultural configuration of the ethnographer, who is situated, as he or she inevitably is, at a given time in a given place. The demonstration that this is so is a source of great satisfaction to the profession as it demonstrates the superiority of anthropologists over lay people. What *they* think of as the bedrock of their ideas, is shown to be but the shifting sand of a unique historical conjuncture in a unique location.

There is no doubt that this kind of criticism of much theory, especially social science theory, is one of the major contributions that anthropologists have made to scientific enquiry. However, such a position can easily slip into a much more radical claim that *the very attempt* to generalise about human beings, however subtly done, is always going to be wrong because it will *always* be nothing but the projection of the anthropologists' way of thinking. This inevitably implies the idea that anthropology as a generalising science about human beings is a mere illusion of particular cultures, or to put it another way, that the very idea of human beings as a subject of study is shown, once again, to be flawed.

Of course, such a stance is rarely made explicit, because, if it were it would run into the well known internal contradictions which absolute relativism inevitably creates, i.e. that such a conclusion is also a particularistic cultural mirage (Sperber 1982, Gellner 1982). Thus we have instead something that might almost be called an anthropological mood rather than a theory. However, all the same the damage is done, and the damage is that any anchor for a subject such as anthropology is abandoned, which amounts to a declaration that the discipline is about nothing. It is not surprising then that anything goes.

We thus find ourselves in the present ridiculous situation. On the one hand when the question: "Is there a common human nature?" is asked, most people, although they probably will consider it rather silly, will answer without hesitation in the affirmative, but, on the other, anthropologists will very much want to answer no, but wont dare to, so they will just go into hiding. Perhaps, part of the reason for this embarrassment is that a straight negation, taken together with what being a member of an anthropology department would seem to mean literally, would imply arguing themselves out of a job.

Of course, denying the unity of mankind is not new in anthropology. However, those who previously advocated such a position, the so called polygenists of the nineteenth century, argued that mankind was made up of unrelated species and consequently approved of slavery and the hunting of Australian Aborigines as though they were wild animals (Stocking 1987). These might not be the precursors the present day anti anti relativists would wish to claim.

This further surreptitious abandonment of a notion of human nature, involved in the condemnation of ethnocentrism in the dialectics of teaching combines dangerously smoothly with the negative stance that the history of the subject has produced. These two elements therefore reinforce each other in an obscure way and produce the situation I described at the outset of this lecture, where, when faced by the kind of request of our psycholinguist, anthropologists, instead of attempting to respond, go into what looks like a silent sulk wrapped in an aura of self-righteousness.

Inevitably, the questioners, whether they are academic colleagues or Malagasy villagers, are less impressed with such a stance than the anthropologists would like them to be. And so, they simply go elsewhere to look for answers to their anthropological questions. And much is available, in the works of writers whose academic affiliations are very varied, but which I label here, for the sake of simplicity, as the new evolutionists. Thus, to mention only some of the most well

known, we have Richard Dawkins, a zoologist, explaining kinship (1976), René Girard, a scholar of literature, expounding on the origin of religion (1972), Stephen Pinker, a psycho-linguist, telling us about totemism (2002) and Matt Ridley, a scientific journalist, telling us about incest (2003). The impact of such works can easily be seen if we look at the sales of their books, a commercial success which contrasts dramatically with that of my colleagues and my own. These books have sold in hundreds of thousands. In other words, they have had the same kind of diffusion as the work of Tylor, Frazer or Morgan had and they probably have a similar influence. The reason is not difficult to find; it is simply that these works seem to offer answers to the universal questions of a public hungry for anthropology.

We may well ask what is the reaction of professional anthropologists to such competitors. The answer is almost none at all. They consider these new evolutionists theories with so much distaste that they seem to be almost unaware of their existence. Thus, most of my anthropological colleagues seem never to have heard of Dawkins' proposal about the nature of culture, or of the word *memes* which he had coined to express it, and if they have, they often fail to know what it means. This is at a time when, if you type the word on Google you obtain 1,280,000 entries.

The point is not only that, anthropologists do not produce the same kind of works as those of Pinker or Dawkins, they also seem to have nothing to say about them. They have withdrawn from the fray to a place where they produce a large number of studies, some good, some bad, about this and that, without any guiding reason or without any attempt at building up a coherent body of knowledge. It is, as though they consider the proposals made in this extra disciplinary anthropology so beneath them, that they are unwilling to acknowledge its very existence.

Part of the distaste of anthropologists towards such work is not simply arrogance; it is the feeling that they have seen it all before. Indeed, when we turn to the writings of these new evolutionists, we usually find exactly the same problems that anthropologists have demonstrated and denounced throughout the twentieth century in the work of the founders. For, in the work of these writers, we come across, for example, the old easy assumption that contemporaries with simple technology are fossils of an earlier age, that human groups form distinct empirical entities, that there are obvious and necessary connections between technology and such things as ancestor worship etc.

Most fundamental of all, however, is the assumption that internal characteristics of human nature can be used directly to account for specific cultures and histories. It is a bit as if someone proposed to account for the pattern of motor traffic in Amsterdam with an explanation of how the internal combustion engine functions. In this way these writers are simply repeats of the old evolutionists, although they sometimes modify their position by according some place to particular cultures and historical conjunctures. But, in the end, these are seen as merely superficial and hiding an unchanging and unchangeable universal base. The reaction of contemporary anthropologists is to repeat the totally legitimate diffusionist points. It sometimes seems as though we were doomed to endlessly repeat the same confrontation between theories based on unacceptable and often superficial views of human nature, but which are nevertheless listened to, and non-theories which are little more than avoiding saying anything and which are therefore ignored.

But is this bind really necessary? I think not, and the first step in freeing ourselves from this endless to and fro is to note that the diffusionist/evolutionist dichotomy carries with it quite unnecessary baggage. The evolutionists implicitly

see human nature as a deterministic procrustean bed which makes particularistic history either impossible or a superficial irrelevance. The diffusionists replace evolutionist determinism with such immaterial disembodied phenomena as cultural traits and more recently symbols, representations and dialogues. Thus the diffusionist reaction to evolutionism bundles together a profound point about the nature of human beings, i.e. the revolutionary historical implications of the kind of brain possessed by *Homo Sapiens* and a quite different, and indeed contrary, totally unexamined philosophical jump from materialism to the purest of idealism. An idealism which means that questions such as: what are human beings like? cannot even be approached.

The point is really quite simple. It is essential that the implications of the continual transformation of people in the complex cumulative socio-historical process, best understood as complex communication, be made central, as indeed it was for the diffusionists. And, that consequently we recognise that human history cannot be seen as the fulfilling of a once and forever given potential, which inevitably implies unilineality and predictability. But it is equally essential that the recognition of this central fact about people does not remove our understanding of human history and culture to a place where people's bodies, minds and the world in which they exist, have somehow vaporised.

And here, a third type of theory might help us, a theory in no way so fundamental as evolutionism and diffusionism, though it has sometimes pretended to be so. A position best thought of as a method, with a potential for theory, rather than a theory as such. I call this type of position functionalism, but again, as I did for evolutionism and diffusionism, I use the word in a wider and somewhat different manner than the way it is usually understood. Functionalism is a position that is not often given its due, partly because it was so clumsily and variously theorised. Also, I recognise and accept the often, if overrepeated and overfamiliar, criticism that have been made against theories which have been by self-proclaimed functionalists, such as the structuralism of Radcliffe-Brown's programmatic articles or Malinowski's teleological arguments. These criticisms, however, only apply to extreme formulations, which, in fact, were never very significant for actual studies. They do not concern me here.

What I understand by functionalism is, above all, a commitment to seeing culture as existing in the process of actual people's lives, in specific places, as a part of the wider ecological process of life, rather than as a disembodied system of traits, beliefs, symbols, representations, etc. It is not accidental that such a position has developed together with the advocacy for long term field work and that it has waned with the latter's decline. This is because maintaining a focus on what has been rather misleadingly called the "embodiment" of life processes is difficult away from specific and closely watched instances. Such a stance, therefore, requires a constant effort.

This is probably why, as I suggested above, functionalism, in the very general sense in which I am using the term here, has been losing ground of late and why it has been replaced by various theories of the diffusionism/culturalism type. This lack of interest in functionalism is also probably due to the fact that it has been such a European stance which has been drowned by imported theoretical American debates, endlessly stuck in the evolutionist/diffusionist controversy. However, the virtues of what I call functionalism are many.

Its theoretical strength lies in its insistence on the complexity of life in particular places and at particular times, on the fact that in normal practice the many facets of human existence, which other sciences, such as politics, philosophy, economics, art, agriculture, kinship, medicine, psychology and so on... separate

for the sake of clarity and simplicity, are inextricably bound together. For functionalism the mental exists in the practical, and both are conjoined functions of bodies in the wider ecology of life.

Because of its insistence on local anchorings, functionalism cannot avoid facing frontally the particularism of human situations. In this it is like diffusionism and unlike evolutionism. However, it is not subject to diffusionism's idealism, since it insists on seeing ideas, representations and values as occurring in the natural world of action and transformation, of production and reproduction. It requires, therefore, a form of epistemological *monism,* uniting people and the environment, the mental and the biological, nature and culture. Thus, it also resists the dichotomies of some of the modern evolutionists, who, wanting to take into account the reality of culture, end up with a type of dualism which sees individuals as partly made up of an immutable universal base, and an essentially different superficial, cultural historical, superstructure.

Functionalism therefore recognises the inseparable combination created by the particularisms of the specificity of human history *and* the properties of natural being in the natural world. This having been said, however, it is not difficult to foresee the theoretical difficulty such a position creates.

Quite simply by taking so many things into account and refusing to separate them, because they are not separate, one risks finding oneself unable to say much except noting how complicated and interconnected everything is.

Functionalism is thus good at forcing us to look at the human world as it is and at forcing us to stop ignoring its unpredictable complexity. However, functionalism threatens to overwhelm by the complexity of the task it has set itself. The functionalist is thus often tempted to give superficial quick fix answers, as did Malinowski, at the end of his life, with his needs theory, or, to take refuge in the contemplation of ethnography for its own sake, when faced by the questions of non anthropologists, be they Malagasy or Dutchmen.

It may thus appear that, if we define our object of study as the unique human combination of unified biological and historical factors, the task of theorising is simply too enormous for our discipline. The task *is* truly difficult but it need not make us despair.

Let me return to the anecdote I began with. It concerned a psycholinguist who wanted to work in cooperation with anthropologists because she believed that her knowledge of the development of language and conceptualisation in children could contribute to anthropological enquiry, while, for her part, she would gain from what we knew. In this lecture I have argued that the reason why such co-operation could not take place was because of the dogmatic refusal by anthropologists to accept that their ultimate aim is the study of human nature, the necessary point of contact between disciplines such as psychology and others, including ours, all concerned, with humans, with minds and bodies, living in natural environments. The refusal, however, is based on unexamined theoretical slights of hand, abetted by aspects of the character of the teaching of the subject in the university.

However, if we recognise that our subject concerns the study of human nature, communication with many other scientific disciplines, also engaged in understanding in this same enterprise, becomes possible, disciplines such as psycholinguistics, for example, and many others. Of course, interdisciplinary communication will still be difficult, but there need not be impassable theoretical partitions.

Indeed, in this grand alliance, the special appointed theoretical task of anthropology, with its continual insistence on the actual life of specific people in specific places, may, precisely, be to try for ways to link the different human sciences. These may be separated for good methodological reasons, but heuristic divisions always threaten to gain a false reality. In the study of man there is a time for diversification but there is also a time for putting things together and this may be the difficult role of the discipline.

From such a perspective, contrary to what the evolutionists imagined, it becomes obvious that anthropology cannot pretend, by itself, to give answers to the questions which most people, including the Zafimaniry sitting around a dying fire deep in the Malagasy forest, quite rightly ask of our discipline. But this will not be a reason for avoiding these requests by disdaining them. Indeed, anthropology should be uniquely well positioned to try to answer, but in so doing it will draw not only on what it has learnt, but always also with the help of these other disciplines which it will continually attempts to reconcile rather than shut out. You might be surprised that in this lecture I have so far not mentioned cognitive anthropology, but I hope that it is by now clear that all the theoretical ground clearing I have been engaged in in this lecture is above all intended in explaining to explain the need and the value of such this subject as I would like it to be.

Finally, I want to take this opportunity to thank the Free University of Amsterdam for having given me the possibility to work with its exiting and varied anthropology department, something which I have already found exhilarating and which I look forward to continue in the future. The friendly and studious atmosphere has been a delight. I want to thank more particularly, Your Excellency, the Chancellor, and the members of the Board of Trustees of the Free University. I was much encouraged in coming here by my meetings with Dean Klandermans who smoothed all the difficulties involved in my affiliation. I owe most to Donna Winslow whose determination ensured my venue and to Andre Droogers who has made me feel so at home in the department he leads. I want to thank warmly Carolien Holleman and most particularly Anouk Nieuwland who has held my hand in my various uncomprehending dealings with Netherlands administrative culture. Finally, I want to say what a pleasure it is, and will be, to work with my long standing friend and colleague Sandra Evers.

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